



# Futility and Gift: Luther on Ecclesiastes

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**M**artin Luther stands out in his high regard for Ecclesiastes.<sup>1</sup> Many modern Christians, in contrast, have an uneasy relationship with the book. Reading this piece of wisdom literature in the church is something like encountering a porcupine in the wild: it's fascinating to regard from afar, but nobody really wants to tangle with it.

It is common, for instance, to hear Christian theologians and preachers say something to the effect of, "Ecclesiastes is what life looks like apart from Jesus."<sup>2</sup> In this rendering, Ecclesiastes' canonical role is to exemplify a hopeless and faithless life. This is an understandable impulse, especially if one fixates exclusively on the book's use of the Hebrew word *hebel*:

<sup>1</sup> For William J. Craft—a president, preacher, and theologian—on the occasion of his retirement.

<sup>2</sup> I have heard similar sentiments voiced in hallway conversations and in casual discussions of Ecclesiastes on multiple occasions. William Brown offers a similar report, taking note that "the temptation looms large among Christian interpreters to treat Qoheleth merely as a foil for the Gospel message." William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 121. It's worth noting, however, that Ecclesiastes is not only controversial among Christians. It has a similarly fraught status among Jews as well. See, e.g., Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 18–19; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1–3.

*The trouble that many have with Ecclesiastes center around its seemingly irreducible contradictions. Should one continue to toil, when it seems clear that the results of such toil are impermanent, at best. But Martin Luther sees that Christians see past these contradictions and live with them when they stand in a core trust in the God who created them.*

“Complete futility! [*habel habaleem*]”  
says Qoheleth,  
“Complete futility! [*habel habaleem*]  
Everything is futile [*hakkol habel*].” (Eccl 1:2)<sup>3</sup>

Still others are bothered by the book’s vision of the afterlife. Reflecting the larger ancient Near Eastern environment, death for Ecclesiastes is a dank, dreary place where all are destined to go—human and beast alike. It matters not if you are wise or foolish, accomplished or lazy, rich or poor. What happens in this life—irrespective of what you do or what is done to you—has no impact on your fate in the afterlife. In the words of Qoheleth,<sup>4</sup> “‘What befalls the fool will also befall me; why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said to myself that this also is vanity” (Eccl 2:15). Unlike in other Jewish and Christian texts (e.g., Daniel, 1 Corinthians, Thessalonians, Revelation), death is not a place for the sorting of souls. Death in Ecclesiastes is the common destination that everyone—and indeed, everything—shares. What could be less Christian than that?

Martin Luther, however, had a very different take on Ecclesiastes—and one that was decidedly less dismissive than one often finds among Christians. The sources we have from Luther are based on his 1524 preface to the book, notes from lectures offered in 1526, and later approved revisions and expansions made by his students in 1532.<sup>5</sup>

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Space does not permit an exhaustive accounting of Luther’s interpretation of Ecclesiastes.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the remainder of this article will focus on his exegesis of Ecclesiastes 2:23–24; 3:10–14; 5:18–19—verses he considered to be at the theological heart of the book. It is neither an accident nor a surprise that Luther focuses on these verses, where God is explicitly described as a giver of gifts in this temporal

<sup>3</sup> The word translated here as “meaningless” (*hebel*) appears thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes and clearly forms one of the main themes of the book. Whether the term is properly translated here as “meaningless,” “absurd,” “ephemeral,” etc. is a matter of debate. For a discussion of the debate, see Leo G. Purdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 191–92.

<sup>4</sup> *Qoheleth* is a transliteration of the book’s main character (see, e.g., v. 1, קהילה).

<sup>5</sup> Respectively: Martin Luther, *Preface to Solomon’s “The Preacher”* (1524), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), 35:263–64; *LW* 15:3–187. See also *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–), 20:1–203.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed interpretation of Luther’s exegesis, see Robert Rosin, *Reformers, the Preacher and Skepticism: Luther, Brenz, Melancthon and Ecclesiastes* (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 1997), 79–150.

life. For Luther, it is only in recognizing and trusting God as gift-giver that we are able properly to enjoy and use these treasures as we live our lives “under the sun” (Eccl 1:3 et al.).<sup>7</sup>

## LUTHER ON ECCLESIASTES

Like other interpreters ancient and modern, Luther identifies the theological heart of Ecclesiastes in the book’s commendations, and especially at 2:24–25; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–19.<sup>8</sup> These reflections on how to live in the world offer rays of light in the otherwise gloomy verdict of “meaningless” offered elsewhere by the aged Solomon.<sup>9</sup> The commendations operate, as William Brown notes, as a “refrain,” every bit as much as its emphasis on *hebel*.<sup>10</sup> In fact, understanding how *hebel* relates to Qoheleth’s commendations is one of the great interpretive questions posed by the book. Luther takes on this challenge with a characteristic emphasis on the human experiences of worry, frustration, and trust. A modern translation of Ecclesiastes 2:22–24 reads as follows:

What does a human being gain in exchange for all his toil [*’amalo*] and strain with which he toils under the sun? For all of his days are woe and his labor is vexation. Even at night his mind finds no sleep. This is also vain [*hebel*]. There is nothing better for a human than to eat and drink and find delight in his toil [*ba’amalo*]<sup>11</sup>—this I also beheld, that it is from God’s hand.

These verses draw a stark contrast between toil (*’amal*) done in vain and toil done with delight. Luther uses this distinction in the text—between the restless and the joyful heart—to identify what is, to him, the core theological claim of the book.

Luther recognized linguistically that toil under one set of circumstances would vex the heart and fill one’s days with woe. Under another set of circumstances, however, toil could be a source of joy and delight. This suggests to Luther that the problem lies not in human labor but in the human heart.<sup>11</sup>

This is the principal conclusion, in fact the point, of the whole book, which he will often repeat. This is a remarkable passage, one that

<sup>7</sup> Luther is not alone in emphasizing God’s gift-giving. In a more modern context, R. N. Whybray has also lifted up God’s generosity and Qoheleth’s joy in Ecclesiastes. See R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 7, no. 23 (1982): 87–98.

<sup>8</sup> See also Ecclesiastes 9:7–10; 11:8–10.

<sup>9</sup> Unlike modern critical interpreters, Luther assumes that Solomon is the preacher in the book and that he is addressing princes and other members of his retinue. Luther assumed that the old king’s words were then copied and assembled by others. See *LW* 15:12.

<sup>10</sup> William P. Brown, “Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do: Qoheleth’s Work Ethic,” *Interpretation* 55, no. 3 (2001): 279.

<sup>11</sup> In his masterful exposition of Luther’s interpretation of Ecclesiastes, Rosin notes that “Vanity lies not in God or in his creation, which he declared good in Genesis; vanity lies solely in man.” Rosin, *Reformers, the Preacher and Skepticism*, 125.

explains everything preceding and following it. This is how it agrees with the preceding: Those pleasures are to be condemned which we by our own counsels seek to achieve for the future, and those labors are to be condemned which we strive to carry out by our own counsels. But those pleasures and labors which God gives are good, and they are to be used for the present without anxiety about either future afflictions or future pleasures. But who is capable of such things? It is rightly said, but what is wisely set forth does not happen. Indeed, hearing we do not hear and seeing we do not see, and no one follows it. We are immersed in striving and anxiety about planning and carrying out our affairs. The heart is averse to plans, and every day it becomes more irritated and restless. Those who are pious refrain from anxiety; the rest of the human race have a restless life until they die. Therefore he says “This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.”<sup>12</sup>

In this winding but insightful passage, Luther argues that toil in this life is not inherently negative. It is a necessary part of our vocational responsibilities. The problem is not that we toil, but that we do so devoid of trust in God. In Luther’s anthropology, a heart that labors without trust is ultimately one that is restless and in despair.

In his comments on 3:12–14, Luther focuses on God as the giver of gifts. Ecclesiastes 3:12–13 reads:

I know that there is nothing better among them than to be happy and to enjoy themselves as long as they live; also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is a gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it, and nothing can be taken away. God has done this so that all might stand in awe in his presence.

In Luther’s reading of these verses, the ability to enjoy one’s life and one’s toil is not something that human beings can conjure on their own. That kind of power cannot be found “under the sun” but only in heaven.<sup>13</sup>

He wants to say: There is nothing better for a man in such a disastrous business than to enjoy the things that are present and to have a happy and joyful heart, without anxiety and care about the future. *But the ability to do this is a gift of God.* “I can teach this,” Solomon says, “but it is not in my ability to do it or to grant that it be done.” He shows what is to be done, and at the same time he teaches where it is to be obtained. He teaches that our cares only bring affliction, but he urges

<sup>12</sup> LW 15:46–47.

<sup>13</sup> As Rosin notes, the phrase “under the sun” has a very specific meaning for Luther in his work on Ecclesiastes. It identifies a “line of demarcation separating the arena for human activity from God’s larger omnipotence.” *Reformers, the Preacher and Skepticism*, 127.

that we call upon God to take away these cares and to give success and peace of heart.<sup>14</sup>

Luther's keen attention to divine action and to semantic nuances in the text allows him to see what so many interpreters miss: that to enjoy the gifts of this life in the way Ecclesiastes urges its readers to do requires an intervention on the part of the gift-giver.<sup>15</sup> In Luther's broader polemic against skepticism and the free will, he wastes no opportunity to insist that what Qoheleth commends to his readers is unattainable apart from the gracious will of God.<sup>16</sup>

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Several chapters later, Qoheleth returns to these themes, reiterating his core findings:

This is what I perceive to be good, that it is fitting to eat, and to drink, and to find delight in all of one's toil that one toils under the sun during the number of days of his life that God has gifted to him, that is his lot. Additionally, whenever God gives wealth and possession to a man, and enables him to enjoy them and to accept their lot and find joy in his toil, this is a gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life, because God causes him to be occupied with the joy of his heart. (Eccl 5:18–20)

Luther's interpretation of these verses fixates on the language of God's gifts and human trust, with a particular emphasis on verse 20 (in Hebrew, v. 19).

This is the conclusion of this entire book or argument, which was also stated earlier in chapters two and three. And here you see that Solomon does not condemn riches, nor does he forbid that we acquire riches or food or drink. But he calls these things gifts of God in order to teach us to put down our anxieties; then we shall wait for all of these things from

<sup>14</sup> LW 15:54, emphasis mine.

<sup>15</sup> For a similar emphasis on the importance of God's gifts in Ecclesiastes, see Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," 89.

<sup>16</sup> Rosin makes the intriguing and compelling case that Luther's lectures on Ecclesiastes should be read as a continuation of his dispute with Erasmus. In his comments on Ecclesiastes, Luther is particularly concerned with the dangers of skepticism and Erasmus's interrelated beliefs about the free will. See Rosin, *Reformers, the Preacher and Skepticism*, 79–150.

God by faith and when God wills shall surrender them with patience, just as Abraham gave his son back to God.<sup>17</sup>

In Luther's assessment, Ecclesiastes offers a contrast between two ways of life: one filled with anxiety, despair, and chaos, and one filled with joy, delight, and pleasure. Both voices are present in Ecclesiastes (one of the chief reasons the book has proven so difficult for interpreters!). The difference between these two paths is whether one toils anxiously and tirelessly after them, or whether one toils trustingly, waiting with hope for what God alone can give. It is difficult not to hear in Luther's exegesis the echoes of Jesus's own reflections on Solomon's life:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. (Matt 6:25–34, NRSV)

Luther's comments on Ecclesiastes 5:18–20 focus on riches and how they should be used and enjoyed.

Therefore riches are not to be rejected. Nor are they granted to us by God for the purpose of our rejecting them or abstaining from them, but rather so that we use them and distribute them to the poor. This statement is the interpreter of the entire book: Solomon intends to forbid vain anxieties, so that we may happily enjoy the things that are present and not care at all about the things that are in the future, lest we permit the present moment, our moment, to slip away.<sup>18</sup>

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### THE GIFT OF ECCLESIASTES

One can detect several common threads woven throughout Luther's exegesis of these verses in Ecclesiastes.

First, like many interpreters of Ecclesiastes, Luther recognizes that multiple voices and perspectives are featured within the book, some of which are in tension with one another.<sup>19</sup> For Luther, this is not the result of complex compositional processes but rather is part of Ecclesiastes' rhetoric and structure. The voice of despair ("Utter futility," 1:2), for instance, serves as an important foil to Qoheleth's commendations (2:24–25; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–19; 8:15), which illuminate a path of joy in the midst of a potentially dismal world. The contrasting of these two voices allows Luther to highlight the dangers of skepticism and to warn against the despair that marks a life without trust in God.

Second, Luther also argues that God alone grants the ability to enjoy one's life and toil. This is not a capacity that emerges from human observation of the world or that one can simply stir up—it is a gift of God. As Luther says, Solomon teaches that this is the case, but "it is not in my [Solomon's] ability to do it or to grant that it be done."<sup>20</sup> This is an important observation coming from the mouth of a king. If he cannot do it, then who can but God?

Third, Luther recognizes that Qoheleth deals with everyday human experiences: anxiety over the future, the desire to control the vagaries of this world, and the frustration that often comes from work that will eventually erode and be forgotten. Human attempts to circumvent these unavoidable realities will ultimately lead one to restlessness and vexation. Trust in God alone leads to labor and gifts that can be enjoyed and used without the corrupting and corrosive power of fear.

<sup>19</sup> For a particularly brilliant interpretation of the contradictions in Ecclesiastes, see Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*.

<sup>20</sup> LW 15:54.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Martin Luther's reading of Ecclesiastes is recognizably his own—with its repeated emphasis on the “struggle between faith and unbelief.”<sup>21</sup> This perspective allows him to account for the multiplicity of voices in Ecclesiastes in a way that is theologically rich and pastorally resonant. To be sure, modern interpreters of the Bible may raise an eyebrow (or two) at some of his readings. Even still, there is no doubt that Luther's emphasis on divine generosity and human trust sheds gospel light on a text that is so often set aside as useless in Christian ministry. ⊕

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 107.